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ABSTRACT

This information digest provides an overview of some areas of agreement between the fields of gifted education and middle school education, some areas of tension, and some promising directions that could engage educators in mutual planning of appropriate services for all middle school students, including the gifted. Shared beliefs include the value of instruction that is theme based, is interdisciplinary, and fosters student self-direction and independence. Problems between gifted and middle-level education exist in the areas of excellence versus equity, emphasis on heterogeneity, use of labels, ambiguity about appropriate middle school curricula, use of cooperative learning as an instructional strategy, attention to affective needs of early adolescents, and general tension. For each problem area, promising directions are listed, such as emphasizing appropriately differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classrooms, emphasizing problem-based strategies rather than skill-focused strategies in cooperative learning activities, planning for both achievement and belonging for advanced learners, and acknowledging strengths and contributions of both practices. (Contains 18 references.) (DB)

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Historically, tension has existed between gifted education and middle school education (Tomlinson, 1992), leaving some advocates of each educational practice suspicious of the other, and leaving middle school students who are advanced in one or more dimensions of learning in a sort of educational no-man's-land. While some legitimate areas of disagreement are likely to persist, there are enough areas of shared belief to bridge the practice between gifted education and middle school education. This digest provides an overview of (1) some areas of agreement between the fields, (2) some areas of tension, and (3) some promising directions that could engage educators in mutual planning of appropriate services for all middle school students, including those we sometimes call "gifted."

Shared Beliefs of Gifted Education and Middle School Education

There are at least three areas of common concern shared by gifted education and middle school education.

First, when it comes to articulated beliefs about what constitutes appropriate instruction for early adolescents, both groups are proponents of instruction that: (1) is theme based, (2) is interdisciplinary, (3) fosters student self-direction and independence, (4) promotes self-understanding, (5) incorporates basic skills, (6) is relevant to the learner and thus based on study of significant problems, (7) is student-centered, (8) promotes student discovery, (9) values group interaction, (10) is built upon student interest, (11) encourages critical and creative exploration of ideas, and (12) promotes student self-evaluation (e.g., Currier, 1986; Kaplan, 1979; Maker & Nielson, 1995; Stevenson, 1992).

Second, few educators of the gifted would argue with the core tenets set forth in *Turning Points* (Carnegie Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989) that middle school programs should: (1) create small communities of learning within larger school settings, (2) teach a solid academic core, (3) ensure success for all students, (4) enable educators closest to students to make important decisions about teaching and learning, (5) staff middle schools with teachers trained to work effectively with early adolescents, (6) promote health and fitness, (7) involve families in the education of learners, and (8) connect schools with communities.

Third, both groups of educators share a deep concern for the cognitive and affective welfare of early adolescent learners. Both groups also understand that there is great variability in the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of the early adolescent group. Both also subscribe to the reality that early adolescents are subject to change, including spurts in physical growth, new interests, and intellectual awareness. And both believe that all middle school students should take part in challenging learning experiences.

Gifted Education and Middle School Education: Problems and Promise

The following issues have concerned educators in gifted education and middle level education. But emerging dialogue offers promise and some evident next steps for moving ahead into a more collaborative future (Clews, 1995).

Excellence vs. Equity

Problem:

Gifted education exists to foster development of high-end excellence. It therefore stresses practices that are most likely to promote "expertise" in learners with advanced performance and/or potential. Middle school education, on the other hand, views education through an equity lens, where all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. In a country that has struggled with the competing values of equity and excellence throughout its history (Gardner, 1961), it is not surprising that both groups continue to struggle with mechanisms for balancing the belief that all people should have equal opportunity with the belief that each individual should be assisted in developing his or her maximum capacity. The tension is heightened in the face of scarce resources for education.

Promising Directions:

- Understand the advantages of emphasizing both equity and excellence.
- Plan for both personal excellence and equity of access to advancement for all learners who are at risk, including those who are gifted.
- Emphasize raising the floors and eliminating the ceilings of educational performance.
- Emphasize both personal excellence and "apex" or "high-end" excellence.

Emphasis on Heterogeneity

Problem:

Because middle school educators emphasize the negative impact of homogeneous grouping on at-risk learners, heterogeneity has become a hallmark descriptor of "good" middle schools (Carnegie Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989). But educators of the gifted value the benefits of ability grouping for advanced learners. The availability of some forms of homogeneous grouping for these learners has been strongly advocated by proponents of gifted education (Allan, 1991). Educators of the gifted are also concerned about a lack of emphasis on differentiated instruction for academic diversity in heterogeneous classrooms in the literature of middle school, and reject a one-size-fits-all approach to educating students as varied as those who inhabit middle schools.

Promising Directions:

- Abandon practices that permit or encourage one-size-fits-all instruction.
- Replace exclusive services with more inclusive ones.
- Emphasize appropriately differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classrooms.
- Use heterogeneous teams, but group and regroup within a team and across teams for instructional purposes.
- Offer a variety of classes that allow for student choice.
- Emphasize use of gifted/talented resource specialists as part of interdisciplinary teams.

Use of Labels

Problem:

Middle school advocates often reject labeling students as "learning disabled" or "gifted" (George, 1993). Such labeling, they believe,

favors some students and stigmatizes others. Advocates of gifted education believe that identifying high potential and performance is necessary if awareness of and planning for talent development is to occur (Coleman & Gallagher, 1995).

Promising Directions :

- Develop ways to identify and address students' needs without overt labeling.
- Work to balance emphasis on student differences and student similarities.
- Use the term "gifted" as part of a phrase that describes students as gifted in mathematics, science, writing, visual arts, music, etc.

Ambiguity About Appropriate Middle School Curricula

Problem:

For much of its 30-year history, middle school education has attended more to issues such as student affect, scheduling, detracking, teaming, and school climate than to what constitutes effective and appropriate curricula in middle school classes (Beane, 1990). Educators of the gifted, who place strong value on challenging opportunities for advanced learners in their area(s) of strength, have been concerned about middle level education, including a basic skills approach to instruction. On the other hand, middle school educators argue that what has been called "gifted education" (e.g., enrichment, high level thinking, problem-solving) is good education for all learners, and should not be reserved for any single group of middle school students. They believe that energies of educators should be focused on establishing that sort of "good education" in heterogeneous classrooms and that the proliferation of such classrooms would serve all middle school students well.

Promising Directions:

- Disavow theories that present middle school students as incapable of high level thought and complex learning.
- Abandon practices that couch middle school as a place for drill and skill.
- Collaborate in establishing complex, problem-based, student-centered curricula, differentiated for student readiness, interest, and learning style.
- Articulate differences between "good education" and "good gifted education."
- Ensure that services restricted to gifted students are taught at a pace, level of complexity, and level of abstractness that is consistent with their abilities and instructional needs.

Use of Cooperative Learning as an Instructional Strategy

Problem:

Middle school educators promote cooperative learning as a prime means of establishing effective heterogeneous communities of learning (Slavin, 1980; Toepfer, 1992). Educators of the gifted find that overuse of some cooperative learning strategies, particularly those focused on learning of basic information and skills, results in a lack of challenge for advanced learners, inordinate use of these learners as "junior teachers," and inappropriate pressure for these learners to solve instructional problems (Robinson, 1990).

Promising Directions:

- Acknowledge the appropriateness of collaborative learning for early adolescents.
- Emphasize problem-based cooperative strategies rather than skill-focused cooperative strategies.
- Move away from cooperative learning as a "savior" strategy.
- Teach and balance cooperation, independence, and healthy competition.
- Use various grouping patterns in cooperative groups, based on instructional purpose.

Affective Needs of Early Adolescents

Problem:

Middle school educators stress development of school environments in which early adolescents can belong to a nurturing group and have consistent access to adults who know and care about them (George & Shewey, 1994). Most educators of the gifted have concerns that affective experiences of advanced learners, which sometimes take on "a different spin," are overlooked in middle schools where advanced learning is deemphasized and where few teachers are trained to understand advanced learners. For example, peer pressure to conform may be experienced in a somewhat different context by many academically talented females and minority students than by other agemates (Ford, 1994; Kerr, 1985).

Promising Directions:

- Recognize that early adolescents share common affective needs, but experience them in differing ways.
- Plan for both achievement and belonging for advanced learners, with special emphasis on females and culturally diverse learners.

General Tension

Problem:

The result of strongly held and often divergent views about educating early adolescents has led to some tension between the two groups of educators. Leaders of each group have not always attempted to build bridges. Publications, conferences, team meetings, and informal dialogues among educators have only recently begun to break ground in listening and attempting to find solutions.

Promising Directions:

- Acknowledge strengths and contributions of both practices.
- Use constructive language when discussing the issues.
- Communicate, cooperate, and collaborate at every level of educational practice.

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